

SEPTEMBER 22, 2005

SCHAKOWSKY RAISES CONCERNS OVER PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE TO KATRINA

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky today raised concerns about why government officials failed to evacuate patients at New Orleans' Charity Hospital and at nursing homes throughout the city in a statement before a joint hearing of the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Representative Schakowsky's statement is below:

I look forward to hearing from Dr. Gerberding about the CDC's efforts to protect the health of those evacuated from the Gulf Coast as well as those working on reconstruction efforts or returning home to cities and towns that present serious health threats because of contamination. The lack of a functioning health care infrastructure makes the task even more difficult.

I want to raise two issues of particular concern. First, I have to comment on what is a blueprint, in my view, for another disaster, a document presented by the Republican Study Committee that is really the meanest proposal I've ever seen. It's an intentional attack on the poor - billions of cuts in Medicaid, increases in Medicare premiums, new home health care co-payments, elimination of loans to graduate students (which would include, I presume, health professional) and cuts in the CDC. I hope the Republican leadership will reject this cruel and counterproductive proposal.

I hope we can explore the response and needs surrounding New Orleans' public hospital. Many reports suggest that Charity Hospital's patients were not evacuated as promptly as patients in other hospitals. It appears as if the health care disparities that existed before Hurricane Katrina may have resulted in disparities in emergency response. I also am interested in hearing from Dr. Gerberding and the other witnesses about how patients who rely on the public hospital will receive care once they return home.

Second, I hope this Committee will look into the tragic treatment of nursing home patients. Dr. Gerberding, I know that CDC does not have authority in this area but, as the Administration's only witness here today, I hope that you will pass along my concerns to your colleagues.

There was nothing more horrifying than hearing Jefferson Parish president Aaron Broussard tell America about the elderly mother of one of his employees, a mother who drowned in a nursing home waiting for rescuers. "Every day she called him and said, "Are you coming, son? Is somebody coming?" But nobody came. We need to know why nursing home residents were not evacuated in time. Was it a question of inadequate staffing, or neglect? Were residents too frail to be moved? If so, were they left to die on their own? What can we do to provide better emergency care for the frailest among us? Fortunately, it looks as if nursing home residents are being properly evacuated in advance of Hurricane Rita. What are they doing that was not done in New Orleans?

We are also beginning to hear about nursing home residents who were evacuated but who may have been sent to substandard nursing homes. I recently learned about one long-term care ombudsman coordinator who expressed serious concerns. She wrote, "I have to tell you that I'm dealing with another side of the story and am really feeling sick as I see what's happening. I have received word in the past two days of one adult home and one nursing home that are getting ready to accept evacuees. They are both for profit facilities that have empty beds because they have been penalized for providing poor care..Neither facility has the staff to be able to provide consistent good care to their own residents, (let) alone evacuees in needs of lots of TLC."

I am concerned about how decisions were made about where to send nursing home residents and how we can ensure that they are cared for adequately.